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ABSTRACT

Sex-role concepts in 120 children aged three to seven were assessed by means of an instrument that allowed children to categorize attributes as being characteristic of males only, females only, both males and females or nobody. The children sorted attributes once for adult peer stimulus figures and once for peer stimulus figures. The relationship of gender conservation to the degree of stereotyping of children's response was also investigated. The overlap children saw between characteristics of males and females increased with age over the age span studied. Girls were less sex-typed than boys, particularly those whose mothers were employed. Gender conservation was associated with decreased sex-typing. The tendency of children to assign positive attributes to their own sex and negative attributes to the other sex peaked at age five. Subjects overall were less sex-typed in their views of adults than peers. (Author/MP)

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Sex Role Concepts

Kathryn Urberg

Sex roles are seen by many to be among the most salient of all an individual's social roles (Mussen, 1969). It is important, then, to know more about the development of children's concepts of what is masculine and what is feminine. We know that children as young as two are beginning to learn the traditional sex-role stereotypes (Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken, 1978), and that by age seven or eight they are as accurate as adults in labeling traits or activities as stereotypically masculine or feminine (Masters & Wilkinson, 1976). Other studies (Brown, 1956; DeLucia, 1963; Williams, Bennet & Best, 1975) have examined children's learning of sex-role stereotypes with respect to toys, games, and traits and have found similar results, i.e., by age seven or eight children have considerable knowledge of traditional sex-role stereotypes.

These studies have all used a two choice format where the child must label a trait or activity as either male or female, and they have provided valuable information on children's knowledge of the stereotypes. A further question grows out of these findings on stereotyping. That is, do children's concepts of masculinity and femininity reflect these stereotypes, or do children see overlap between the concepts masculinity and femininity? The first purpose of the present study is to describe differences in the years three to seven in children's concepts of what is masculine and what is feminine, when they have the option of indicating that a characteristic may belong to both males and females.

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The second purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between gender constancy and the degree of stereotyping in children's sex-role concepts. Kohlberg (1966; Kohlberg & Ullian, 1974) theorizes that gender constancy is the critical organizer of sex-role concepts and behavior. He suggests that the knowledge that one is and will always remain a male or female, which comes with the achievement of gender constancy, results in the child valuing things perceived to be like the self. Things with male labels are valued by boys and conversely things with girl labels are devalued. In this manner, according to Kohlberg, the child becomes more sex-typed after achieving gender constancy.

The recent results of Kuhn, Nash, and Brucken (1978) are consistent with Kohlberg's position. They found gender constancy to be significantly related to knowledge of sex-role stereotypes in two- and three-year-old children. They also found evidence that the children were assigning positive traits to their own sex and negative traits to the other sex.

In other work relating to gender constancy, Slayby and Frey (1974) found that for boys, gender constancy was related to the amount of time spent watching a same sex model. A similar trend was found for girls. Marcus and Overton (1978), however, found gender constancy not to be related to same sex preference. They suggest that the highest degree of same sex preference, (and perhaps stereotyping) occurs before achievement of gender constancy, when children are not sure that their gender will remain constant if they engage in opposite

sex activities. On the other hand, children who have achieved gender conservation are free to be more flexible, secure in the knowledge that their gender will not change.

The final area of interest in this study was the examination of the relationship between children's concepts of masculinity and femininity in peers as opposed to concepts of masculinity and femininity in adults. Several studies have found differences in children's conceptions of adult roles compared to their conceptions of children's roles (Emmerich, Goldman & Shore, 1971; and Hickey and Kalish, 1968). Therefore it is likely that children's conceptions of masculinity and femininity will differ depending on the peer or adult status of the person the child is considering. No predictions are made as to whether children are more sex-typed in their concepts of adults or in their concepts of peers.

In this investigation, children aged three, five, and seven were asked to categorize attributes as being characteristic of males, or of females, of both males and females, or of neither. The attributes chosen were slightly modified from those used by Williams, Bennet and Best (1975) in their study of children's knowledge of sex-role stereotypes. The children sorted the attributes once with respect to peers and once with respect to adults. Slaby and Frey's (1974) gender conservation task was also administered to the five- and seven-year-olds. This age range was chosen to cover the early years of development of the concepts of masculinity and femininity, and to extend into the years where gender constancy is being achieved. The mother's employment status was also

included since previous studies (Hoffman, 1974) have shown this variable to be associated with decreased stereotyping in girls..

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 120 white children, 20 girls, and 20 boys at each of the ages; three, five and seven (mean ages 3 years 5 months; 5 years, 5 months; and 7 years, 6 months, respectively). The children were obtained from two middle to upper middle class nursery schools, and neighborhood contacts in a middle to upper middle class neighborhood. Over 90% of the parents contacted agreed to let their child participate.

Materials

The attributes the children were asked to sort were adapted from Williams, Bennet and Best (1975). A two sentence story was made up to illustrate each attribute. Two attributes did not seem appropriate for children, so the stories "punishes" and "makes money" were given in adult form only. Pilot testing was done on a group of middle class preschoolers. Only concepts that were understood by the majority of three-year-olds were included. This gave 18 stories to give along with the child stimulus figures, and 20 stories to give along with the adult stimulus figures. An example of a story is the following: "Some people are brave. If a house was on fire they would go inside to rescue people. Who are the brave people? Are they girls (women), boys (men), both boys and girls (men and women) or nobody?" A list of attributes used can be seen in Table 1.

To assist the child in remembering the categories for sorting, the child was shown four boxes, one with a picture of a male, one with a female one with both, and one with no picture. There were three sets of stimulus boxes with pictures of adults and three sets with children. An attempt was made to use the silhouettes used by Williams et al. However, in pretesting it was discovered that the three-year-olds did not recognize them as representing male and female children or adults. Thus, the decision was made to use colored pictures cut out from mail order catalogues. The pictures were selected so that the male and female figures were the same height and in about the same pose. Three sets were created, and the set used was selected randomly for each child.

Procedure

All subjects sorted the attributes illustrated by the stories into one of four categories: male, female, both male and female or neither. The sort was done once for adults and once for peers. The order of the stories was randomized for each child and the child-adult order was counterbalanced. All subjects were tested individually in an unused area of the school or in a quiet area of their home. For the younger children testing was done in two to three sessions separated by no more than a day. Individual sessions varied in length from 10 to 30 minutes depending on the attention span of the child. Testing was done by three female undergraduate students and the author. Specifically, subjects were told that we would be telling them stories about people and their

job was to tell us who the story was about. They were told that the story might be about girls (women) or boys (men) or about boys and girls (men and women) or about nobody. The child was instructed to use the category nobody if she/he thought that nobody was like the people in the story or if the child did not understand the story. The child could answer either verbally or by placing a marker in the box to indicate his/her answer. The examiner recorded all answers. Each child heard 18 stories when the stimulus pictures were children and 20 when the stimulus pictures were adults. One three-year-old was eliminated from the sample for failure to understand, and one 5-year-old was eliminated for failure to cooperate. Both were replaced through further testing. For all subjects, mother's and father's occupations were recorded.

Slayby's Gender Conservation Test (Slayby & Frey, 1975) was administered according to Slayby's directions to the five- and seven-year-olds. Since pilot testing indicated that no three-year-olds conserved gender, it was not administered to them.

Results

Relationship between sex-typing and age

To investigate the effects of age, sex and mother's work on the degree of sex-typing in children's concepts of masculinity and femininity the following analysis was completed. Three scores were created for each child for each condition (adult and child). Based on William's (1975) categorization of each trait as masculine or feminine, each child was given a male stereotype score, a female stereotype score, and

an overlap score. The male score consisted of the total number of times the child assigned a trait Williams, et al. found to be masculine to the masculine category. The female stereotype score was derived in an analogous way. The overlap score was the total number of traits the child assigned to the category both males and females. The category nobody was used so the child would not be forced to categorize a word not understood. It was too infrequently used to be useful as a scoring category (no child used it more than twice). Each child, then, received six scores, three for the peer sort and three for the adult sort. For each of these six scores a three way analysis of variance using the least squares solution for unequal numbers in each cell was performed. The factors were age, sex, and work status of mother. The main effect of age was significant for peer overlap [$F(2,118)=9.58$, $p<0.00$]; adult overlap [$F(2,118)=9.86$, $p<0.000$]; peer female stereotype [$F(2,118)=3.23$, $p<.043$]; and adult male stereotype [$F(2,118)=4.73$, $p<.011$]. For both peer and adult overlap, this effect was due to an increase in overlap scores with age. For both there was an especially sharp increase between age five and seven. For peer female and adult male stereotypes the effect was produced by the high stereotype scores of the five-year-olds. There were two significant interactions. For adult female, the sex X age interaction [$F(2,118)=3.36$, $p<.038$] indicates boys use the adult female stereotype more across the age range studied, while girls use it less. The age X sex X work status interaction for peer overlap [$F(2,118)=3.34$, $p<.039$] indicates that for five-year-olds, girls

whose mothers work saw the most overlap between characteristics of boys and girls, and boys whose mothers worked saw the least. Thus seeing overlap between the characteristics of males and females increases with age, while of all age groups the five-year-olds, especially five-year-old boys whose mothers work, seem most stereotyped in their concepts of masculinity and femininity.

Role of Gender Conservation

In order to explore the effect of gender conservation on sex-role concepts an age (five, seven) X sex (male, female) X gender conservation (yes, no) analysis of variance using the least squares solution was performed. Since subjects were not selected with respect to the mother's employment variable, there was a disproportionate distribution between the mother's employment and gender conservation variables. Thus, mother's employment could not be included in this analysis. This disproportionate distribution raises the question of whether or not there is a relationship between stage of gender conservation and mother's work status. The gender constancy scores of 20 additional four- and five-year-olds which were collected for another purpose were examined, but no relationship between gender constancy and mother's employment was found.

The main effects of age replicated those of the previous analysis. There was a significant main effect of sex for adult male and adult female stereotypes [$F(1,79)=4.08$, $p<.036$; $F(1,79)=8.30$, $p<.005$ respectively]. In both cases males were more stereotyped than females. For peer overlap there was a main effect of gender conservation [$F(1.79)=3.84, p<.051$].

Subjects who conserved gender were found to see more overlap in their peer sex-role concepts. This finding is modified by the sex X gender conservation interaction [$F(1,79)=5.80$, $p<.019$], which shows that this effect is produced by the girls only. There was aldo a significant interaction for the adult female stereotype. In this age X gender conservation interaction [$F(1,79)=4.08$, $p<.047$], five- and seven-year-old nonconservers were not significantly different from one another, but seven-year-old conservers were significantly less stereotyped than the five-year-olds.

Peer-Adult Comparisons

In order to investigate the degree to which the subjects engaged in stereotyping for peers as opposed to adults, related sample t-tests were performed comparing the z-scores for peers and adults on the male stereotype, female stereotype and overlap scores across all groups. A significant difference was found for overlap, $t(119)=-2.76$, $p<.007$ with the subjects seeing more overlap when the target was adult rather than a peer.

Content of the Concepts

Core attributes of masculinity, femininity, and both masculinity and femininity were defined as agreement by 11 of the 20 subjects at any age/sex combination on the categorization. Chi squared analysis indicates that any categorization in which 11 subjects agree on the categorization is significantly different from chance ($.01<p<.02$). Table 1 shows the tabulation of core attributes by each age and sex grouping.

Insert Table 1 about here

Inspection of the table confirms the previous finding that the category both is used more by older subjects (both male and female). Agreement between boys and girls on categorization increases with age (Percentage agreement at three =20%, five =25%, seven =47%) as well. It can also be seen that the traits reflecting the nurturant care-taking role are seen by both boys and girls as characteristic of both males and females, while instrumental traits such as strong, brave, and fixes things remain traditionally masculine. By age seven, neither boys nor girls saw anything unique about the peer female role. The only unique attribute of adult femininity was weak, while boys and girls agreed that men were strong, brave and could fix things.

In order to see if children were selecting positive characteristics for their own sex and attributing negative characteristics to the other sex, two analyses were done. First, scales were formed consisting of respectively 1) the positive attributes assigned to own sex, 2) positive attributes assigned to the other sex, 3) negative attributes assigned to own sex, and 4) negative attributes assigned to other sex. This was done separately for peer and adult sorts. These scores were subjected to a three way ANOVA with factors of age and sex. The significant results are presented in Table 2. In general, scores on all of these scales decreased with age, reflecting the increased use of the category

Insert Table 2 about here

"both" with increasing age. However for the peer sort, five-year-olds were significantly higher than the other two groups on assigning positive attributes to the same sex and negative attributes to the other sex. This is consistant with the other results indicating that the five-year-olds were the most sex-typed in their concepts of masculinity and femininity. The main effects of sex indicated that both males and females assigned more positive attributes to males. The age X sex interaction resulted from the five-year-old girls, more than the boys, assigning negative traits to the other sex. The core concepts for each age/sex group were also tabulated according to whether they were positive or negative and same sex or opposite sex. The girls assign positive and negative attributes equally to both sexes or have a tendency to attribute positive characteristics to males. The boys also assigned positive attributes to males, but they show little tendency to attribute negative characteristics to females. This finding seems to reflect the previously noted tendency of the male instrumental attributes to remain distinctively masculine, while most of the negative male attributes and most of the feminine characteristics, both positive and negative, are seen as belonging to both males and females.

Discussion

Contrary to what was predicted from Kohlberg's cognitive developmental

view of sex-role development, sex-typing decreased over the age range three to seven, and in general, gender conservation was associated with decreased sex-typing. Marcus and Overton (1978) suggest that the relationship between gender conservation and sex-typing is opposite to the one Kohlberg hypothesizes. They suggest that after the child achieves gender conservation, and therefore understands that their sex will remain constant despite superficial transformation such as dress, toy, and game choice, sex-role preferences or attitudes that are more flexible become less threatening. In this view, younger children would be expected to stick very closely to sex appropriate behavior and preferences since they are not convinced that their gender would remain the same if they did not. Once they achieve gender conservation they can afford to be more flexible since now they know there is no danger of becoming a member of the other sex. The current results are in general consistent with such an interpretation since the peak of sex-typing occurred before gender constancy was achieved. Further research will be necessary to explore this hypothesis.

The tendency of children to assign positive or socially desirable attributes to their own sex and negative attributes to the other sex does not seem to be a strong one. Boys did assign positive core attributes to males but did not assign negative core attributes to females. Girls assigned positive and negative attributes to males and females about equally. The ANOVA data indicate that five-year-olds, more than three- and seven-year-olds, assigned positive attributes to

their own sex and negative attributes to the other sex. The attributes accounting for these results must vary considerably, since the effect is only apparent when scale scores are considered. This is unlike the other ANOVA results which are apparent in the core attributes analysis as well. Kuhn with her two- and three-year-old subjects seems to be seeing the increase in sex-typing that in our data peaks at age five and then decreases. The peak of sex-typing in our sample occurs before the achievement of gender conservation.

Finally, children were seeing adults in less sex-typed terms than children. To a great extent adults were seen as nurturant and competent without regard to sex. On reflection, this is not too surprising. Children must enact boy and girl sex-roles, not adult male and female sex-roles. Therefore the distinctions between boy and girl should be more salient than those between men and women. One would expect then that that differention of adult male and female sex roles would increase as children grow older.

In summary, the major outcome of this study is the documentation that when given an opportunity to classify attributes as both masculine and feminine, children do see considerable overlap between attributes appropriate for males and females. The subjects increased in the overlap of their concepts of masculinity and femininity over the age range studied. Gender conservation was in general associated with decreased sex-typing. Girls were less sex-typed in their concepts than boys, particulary those girls whose mothers worked. Subjects overall were less sex-typed in their views of adults than peers.

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TABLE 1

CORE ATTRIBUTES[1] FOR ADULTS AND PEER SEX ROLE CONCEPT FOR BOYS AND GIRLS AT 3, 5, & 7

ATTRIBUTES	PEER						ADULT					
	Male		Female		Both		Male		Female		Both	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1) Polite - says thank you					7	7					7	5,7
2) Brags						7						
3) Brave	5,7						5,7	7				5
4) Can do anything					7						7	7
5) Feels sorry for others				3	7	7					3,5,7	5,7
6) Fights	7	5			5	7					7	
7) Fixes things	3,5,7	3,5					3,5,7	7				
8) Gentle				5	7	7			5		7	7
9) Affectionate hugs & kisses						7					5,7	5,7
10) Makes rules											7	5
11) Messy					7	3,7						
12) Needs others					5	7						7
13) Uses bad words											7	
14) Shy						7						
15) Strong	5,7	5,7					5,7	5,7				
16) Takes care of children					7	5,7					5,7	5,7
17) Weak										7		
18) Mean						7						
19) Punishes											5,7	5,7
20) Makes money											7	7

[1] Core attribute is defined by 11% or more of subjects in an age/sex group assigning an attribute to a single category.